

THE WESTERN TIGER SNAKE

Notechis scutatus occidentalis, subsp. nov.

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In general appearance the Tiger Snake, or Norne, of South-western Australia, is so different from the typical eastern form that it is remarkable that its relationship has not been investigated. The extensive series in the collection of the Western Australian Museum comprises 40 specimens from all parts of the snake's known range thus enabling a detailed examination to be undertaken.

A recently killed example, R 9430, presented on September 29, 1948 by the collector, Mr. L. Bower, of Bassendean, was selected as the type and may be described as follows:

Head separated by a distinct neck, canthus rostralis present, anal entire, sub-caudals all undivided. Length of head and body, 885 mm.; tail, 163 mm. = 1,048 mm. in total length.

Eye, horizontal diameter equal to its distance from the mouth.

Rostral, slightly broader than deep, the part visible from above about equal to half its distance from the frontal.

Inter-nasals, shorter than the pre-frontals.

Pre-frontals, greatest length, 5.6 mm.

Frontal, pentagonal, wider behind (8 x 7 mm.) much wider than the supra-oculars (4.5 mm.), as long as its distance from the tip of the snout, slightly shorter than the suture between the parietals and considerably shorter than these (15.3 mm.).

Nasals, undivided, in contact with the single pre-ocular.

Post-oculars, 2.

Temporals, 2 + 2, lower anterior large and wedged in between the fifth and sixth upper labials, almost reaching the mouth.

Upper labials, 6; the third and fourth entering the eye, the third and fourth fused on the left.

Lower labials, 7; three in contact with the anterior chin shields which are as long as the posterior.

Scalation. Scales in 17 rows round the middle of the body. Ventrals, 152. Anal entire, Sub-caudals, 45, undivided.

Coloration. Above bluish-black or dark steel-blue, but in certain lights blackish-brown, with very ill-defined light orange-yellow*

*Ridgway's *Colour Standards*.

cross-bands, restricted to the basal portion of a single row of scales and entirely absent on the posterior fourth of the body and the tail, which are uniform like the head. Upper lip, chin and anterior portion of the under-surface light orange-yellow, the ventrals with blackish margins which increase posteriorly until towards the vent the yellow is entirely absent.

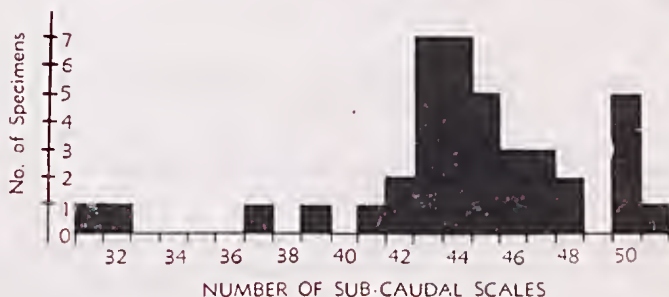
Comparisons

From an examination of the full series of specimens it is evident that many of the head characters show variation which prevent their being used as a means of separation of the western form from the eastern. When we turn to the scalation of the body and tail, however, points of distinction do emerge.

In 32 of the specimens the scales are in 17 rows at the middle of the body, 8 only showing 19—the figure for *Notechis scutatus*



scutatus (from eastern Australia) and *N. scutatus niger* (Kangaroo Island, South Australia). The ventrals, which according to J. R.



Kinghorn (*The Snakes of Australia*, 1929) are said to range from 128 to 136 in *N. scutatus scutatus*, to number 163 in *N. s. ater* (Flinnders Range, South Australia) and *N. s. niger*, are in this new western form found to range between 145 and 160 (with two exceptions), no less than 33 of the specimens having between 151 and 160 ventrals.

The sub-caudals, too, show significant differences. In *N. s. scutatus* they vary from 30 to 35; *N. s. niger* has 45 and *N. s. ater*, 47, the figures of the two latter being within the range of the western snake in which 34 specimens vary from 42 to 50.

The coloration, particularly the light orange-yellow of the under-surface and the narrow cross-bands, is entirely different from any of the eastern snakes.

It is, therefore, considered justifiable to regard our form as a distinct subspecies for which the name *occidentalis* is proposed.

The range of the snake, as indicated by material received at the Museum in the last 30 years, is shown on the accompanying map. It must be pointed out that the snake is usually found near river swamps and other situations where frogs abound. This feature, too, seems to separate it from its eastern relatives.



Areas where Museum specimens of the Western Tiger Snake have been collected. (Localities are indicated by the following letters: A, Albany; B, Brookton; E, Esperance; F, Fremantle; G, Gingin; M, Manjimup; N, Northam; T, Tambellup; W, Williams.)